Toying with Teaching-Learning Materials: Early Years of Learning

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Four year old Gangesh fitted some pieces of coloured plastic blocks into each other and pushed the completed structure through the school premises. It had a body and an elongated structure in the front. While the other children drew or made fish and flower, we thought this was an elephant.

But negating our view of it, he assertively declared that it was a track-hoe! (Fig. 1)

Figure 1: Gangesh's track-hoe

His track-hoe needed no wheels, it could move when Gangesh pushed it, but its digging power had caught his attention. He moved the front of it up and down into the ground when asked to explain how it was a track-hoe.

Toys and games have generally been associated as gifts and children's playthings at home and in the family. With the general concept of children learning or getting something useful from the material gifted or given to them, toys and games become agents or medium of learning. Bringing the children from home to school, toddler classrooms usually are equipped with what could still be termed as toys for guided learning. These may have been implanted to ensure development of sensory and motor skills, problem-solving skills, comprehension of cause and effect and symbolic thinking. Accordingly, either the material is designed to suit Piagetian stages of growth and/or fit well into the context of the growing child (Guyton, 2011) (Montessori, n.d.).

However, as in the case of Gangesh, Brian Sutton-Smith in a study observed that children have a personal narrative attached to toys or material they use. He highlighted that the creative capacity of the child is not limited to the toy-stimulus provided to it (Sutton-Smith, 1992). There are prior mental processes and ideas of the child that play a role in how it perceives the object of play.

Toys then may act as a resource for teachers in class in the early years of learning but a child may be perceiving it differently.

Dineshwari ma'am, a teacher of students in the age group three to five, looks forward to preparing them for grade one. She suggests that toys for children should be bigger in size and easy to handle and cost-effective. While her store house of playthings for kids had a variety of objects, she stated that plastic is the best material that could be used for objects of children's learning since it would not harm them and would not break easily. I understand her need for unbreakable material, but my observation of an instance brought to fore another important aspect of a child's thought process.

I attempted getting children's views and understanding of animals on field, through material other than the textbook, and the use of child-centred approaches through toys and games to trigger the child's imagination and creativity (NCF, 2005).

On a festival called *Pola* in Chhattisgarh, bullock -like toys in wood and clay make appearance in the market. I had handed these wooden as well as clay bullocks to the children. While most identified clay bullocks as bullocks based on its appearance and shape; some were of the opinion that the wooden version was a dog. When asked the reason for their choice, a couple of children said that because the model was smaller and lighter (Fig.2)

Two things: the weight and size of the material concerned and the difference that arose from sound in the wheels of the two, seemed interesting here.

Figure 2: Bullocks made of clay (top) & wood (below)

The wheels of clay bullocks had small pebbles in them which made a peculiar sound when the bullocks were played with, whereas the wooden wheels had different and a comparatively fixed sound. For the children, the sound made against the clay wheels by the pebbles from within was that of a cow-bell or the belts they are put around the bullocks that they own. Here, I discovered the child's potential to interpret material based on its abstract and more detailed qualities than what may be expected of them. It created a stark difference between how I looked at both the objects as bullocks from an already informed idea of it and how children could construct their own representation or *signification* of it for themselves (Mohd. Yakin & Andreas, 2014).

Figure 3: Gangesh's water tank made of wooden blocks, the wooden lid (1st part) and place to store water inside the hollow (2nd part)

In another instance, while Gangesh and a friend of his would agree on making a track-hoe or a train from plastic blocks, they would make a house or a water tank with blocks of wood. These blocks could not be fitted into each other, but could be placed and balanced on each other. This gave me an insight into their idea of the process of constructing and building. Additionally, when asked about where would the water be stored in the water tank or how people would enter the house, since the it had two openings, these two boys could give specific answers by opening a wooden lid for the water tank and pointing inwards through a bigger opening in the house like structure (Fig. 3)

It is of interest here to look at the signifying or the semiotic function of toys which are learning materials in early and primary levels of education.

Semiotics is the study of the physical and the linguistic world through which the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure called signs. For him, language is a system of signs. These signs create a reality for us through the signifier (the sound-image) and the signified (the representation). Both the signifier and the signified are inseparable and complement each other to fill a sign with meaning for which it stands or it represents (Mohd. Yakin & Andreas, 2014).

Brian Sutton-Smith attempted to view the semiology or the signification of toys i.e. the sound image an object could make in a child's mind and accordingly what would it stand for. In his study he cautions us about toys or learning materials that mimic the original or real objects. In his view, the toy or a plaything in itself is meant to depart from the original giving more space in its interpretation to the 'resident fantasies within the player's experiences' (Sutton-Smith, A Toy Semiotics, 1984).

P.J. Miller rightly said that an object 'must not be analysed only by the determinant rule-based objectivist procedures, since as an instrument of social strategy it retains a high-degree of flexibility' (Gongoulis, 2003). The child attempts an internalisation or appropriation of an object at hand, re-contextualising it with personal meaning.

Basing his argument on the importance of the flexibility and the malleability of the material used for playthings for children, Roland Barthes, a French linguist stated that substances like plastic and metal are removed from the 'humanity of touch', while wood is 'firm and soft… a poetic substance'

(Barthes, 1957), it does not break at once but it wears out modifying its relationship with the user over time.

This makes me think whether the toy has got 'hurt', while if it had been *plastic* it would never die, but might be thrown away.

During my practice in grade 4, when we made dolls out of socks and paper, it was not a doll for this one girl. It was me. To get her understanding of body parts right, she had identified my body with that of the doll and put a *bindi* and earrings on it. More so, this doll made out of flexible material like cloth, cotton and rolled paper helped the child bring it to life. Unlike her previous activity of drawing me into a static picture, this dimensional doll allowed her to work and re-work on how she looked at me from time to time (Fig. 4).

Figure 4: Doll made of socks, paper and cotton (to the left); different earrings, bindi, eyes could be used for the same doll

Figure 5: Children arranging coloured pebbles on alphabets in Hindi

An even more fascinating instance of how properties of learning material may support the child's attempt to make meaning out of it came to my eyes when a group of children not only used chalk to write the Hindi letter 'अ' on the floor but arranged coloured pebbles through its shape and made it a reality for themselves (Fig.5)

Finally as an adult 'toying' with teaching-learning materials for effective toying of it by the child - the material should be for constructive play allowing for playful construction and not mere construction (Forman, 1998); making the child not only its owner and user but also the creator (Barthes, 1957).

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